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## SORTING COLLEGE FRESHMEN

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The question of establishing a fair measure of the entering college student's ability to write English has been perhaps greater than the difficulty of rating him in any other so-called entrance subject, and the importance of arriving at some fair test and of bringing deficient students up to the minimum requirement is, of course, emphasized by the necessity of his representing his knowledge of subjects in all departments through written examinations and reports. Realizing the peculiarity of the English situation, the faculty of the University of Chicago have for many years dealt with this as a separate problem.<sup>1</sup>

The basic assumption has been made that the proof of a student's ability to write rested on the average of his written work at any given time and not on entrance credentials or college credits. At the request of the English department, members of all other departments in the University are urged to report students whose work in English is markedly defective. If the case is flagrant enough, a student's credit for a course in English may be withdrawn, and he may be compelled to pass it again before his diploma is granted. Matters of internal administration in a college are, however, relatively uninteresting to the school man. But the application of this same assumption to the entering student is more

<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, not a unique arrangement at Chicago. Similar systems are in operation at Madison, Ann Arbor, and elsewhere. A comparative study of all these would be interesting and profitable, particularly with reference to what constitutes eligibility to the required Freshman English course.

interesting, as it bears directly on his status and involves a regular procedure which demands extra instruction and an enlarged faculty. This is the procedure which has given to this article the title, "Sorting College Freshmen."

English 1 is required of every Freshman student entering the University as one of the three courses in his first twelve weeks or quarter. In the autumn when the largest number enter, new students are convened on their first day, and among other important announcements, information is given to them that all must register in English 1, but for the first week merely on probation. During this trial period an amount of writing is exacted from the Freshman which would be unreasonable were he required to do as much in each week of the course. Each student prepares outside of class two themes which, in the average case, aggregate 1,000 to 1,500 words, and, in addition, writes one exercise in class and takes a written examination. The subjects for assigned papers are naturally simple and concrete, but so varied from year to year that they cannot be anticipated and prepared for.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the trial period, those students whose work has shown either a notable inability to think, to construct, or to write simple sentences without error are rejected from English 1 and passed back into English 0.

A word is in place as to the method of determining a student's fitness or unfitness to carry the regular work. A copy of the *English Journal* for the spring contained a letter from a teacher who was frankly indignant at the methods employed and evidently certain that the basis of rejection of students was arbitrary and unjustifiable. From the address given at the head of the letter, it was possible to run down the cases of the students concerned, and see what sort of English they had presented in their test papers. It was no worse than the following. It is impossible to give copious illustrations, but here are sentences from students diverted from English 1 to English 0 in October, 1912:

"Altho I am at present independent of my upkeep I realized that at an institution where so many positions were open to those who needed them,

<sup>1</sup> The exercise in class for the present year was in the nature of a report on expository prose read aloud by the instructor, and the examination involved the definition of one or two rhetorical terms, the planning of a hypothetical theme, the correcting of a few defective sentences, and the writing of a paragraph of exposition.

an air of business would be entertained that might not be found in other places."

"Also in social life in a town such as Lincoln the lines are more closey drown that is one must either take an active part or be to quite an extent an outcast, where here one can live as they please or as conditions allow them."

"When asked why he is at any college or university, frequently one's mind is a perfect blank. But. however, after considerable thought on that subject one is quite convinced why he is there."

"In Chicago besides the different people are fine parks, museums and other educating things which every one should have a good idea of before entering lives work."

"The University of Chicago, an institution of learning located in the city of Chicago offers many more opportunities than does many other schools and colleges of the same purpose."

"The number of instructors employed in the school I do not know but if I may say what I have herd graduates of the University of Chicago say and also graduates of other large institution say that the teachers here where the best money could hire."

The course known as English o, designed for the edification of students who write like this, is conducted under the roof of the University High School by two of the ablest Senior instructors in the English department there. It is given at the two hours coinciding with the hours in which the fourteen present divisions of English 1 are conducted, and it involves no extra payment of student fees. There is no necessary ignominy in being enrolled in English o, nor is there necessarily a permanent penalty for being placed in this division.

The possibilities for the student sent to English o are four:

a) If he is so hopelessly deficient that the instructor in English o sees no chance of preparing him for English 1 during the course of the next six months, he is given a failure and the burden of preparation in English for college work is laid upon his individual shoulders.

b) If he does fairly well so that it would be safe to admit him to English 1 at the beginning of the ensuing quarter, he is passed into it, and then if he passes English 1, he has at the end of his first six months secured credit for five courses instead of the six secured by the normal student.

c) If he shows distinct progress in the elementary matters of pronunciation, grammar, and syntax, to which the English 1

instructor cannot give the chief emphasis, he may be passed out of English 0 to English 2. This is an extra course without fee, supplementary to English 1, running during the Winter and Spring quarters, into which delinquents in English 1, as well as advanced students in English 0, are passed. They are held here under an indeterminate sentence, and if the results justify it, are sooner or later given credit for English 1.<sup>1</sup>

d) In exceptional cases, the student rejected from English 1 and put in English 0 may even, on recommendation of the instructor in English 0, be given credit for English 1 during his first quarter's residence. It will thus be seen that the whole system is as far as possible so arranged as to take account of the individual equipment and ability of the student, and so as to avoid at any place catching him in the cog-wheels of the machinery with the result that the possibly mistaken judgment of a single instructor will permanently embarrass him.

With these statements as a background, some figures relative to the developments during the last seven years in which this system has been in operation may be pertinent and intelligible. Table I shows the number of students who in the last seven years have been rejected from English 1 and put into English 0, and the subsequent fates of these students—those who failed in English 0, those who dropped the course, those who were passed directly into English 2, from which it was possible for them to get credit for English 1 before the end of the Winter Quarter, and the small minority who received credit for English 1 at the same time with the students who had not been rejected. Examination of the table shows that during the first three years there were rather wide fluctuations, due probably to the experimental nature of the course in these years, but that in the last four completed autumns English 0 has definitely settled down and shown definite tendencies.

<sup>1</sup> Thus, the student dropped from English 1 into English 0, and passed from 0 to 2 and then out of 2, secures his major's credit as quickly as students who have been held in 1 and detained in 2 for extra practice; and English 2, since it is an added late afternoon course, does not prevent a student from registering in three regular courses, and so from securing credit for six majors during the first two quarters.

TABLE I  
THE COURSE IN ENGLISH 0

| Quarter           | No.<br>in Class | Failed | Dropped | To<br>English 2 | To<br>English 1 | Credit for<br>English 1 |
|-------------------|-----------------|--------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Autumn, 1905..... | 89              | 8*     | 1       | 24              | 54              | 2                       |
| Autumn, 1906..... | 30              | 15     | 0       | 3               | 12              | 0                       |
| Autumn, 1907..... | 57              | 16     | 2       | 11              | 27              | 1                       |
| Autumn, 1908..... | 78              | 32     | 4       | 21              | 24              | 7                       |
| Autumn, 1909..... | 69              | 24     | 2       | 18              | 23              | 2                       |
| Autumn, 1910..... | 53              | 13     | 0       | 18              | 14              | 8                       |
| Autumn, 1911..... | 46              | 10     | 0       | 20              | 15              | 1                       |

\* One suspended.

a) The number of students sent into this class, the number who have failed in it, and the number who have been advanced from it into English 1, have all decreased in like proportion.

b) The number passed into English 2 has remained about constant, a fact which means that the proportion has somewhat increased.

c) The very small number who have received direct credit for English 1 is too low to justify any deductions.

A second table is also interesting with reference not merely to the matter of English 0, but to the entire method of "sorting Freshmen" in connection with which English 0 is the most striking feature. This shows that in general the number of registrations in

TABLE II  
THE COURSE IN ENGLISH 1

|                   | Number of<br>Sections | No. of Reg-<br>istrations | No. Sent to<br>English 0 | No. Sent to<br>English 2 | Number<br>Dropped | Number of<br>Failures |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Autumn, 1905..... | 6                     | 392                       | 89                       | 61                       | 10                | 18                    |
| Autumn, 1906..... | 6                     | 341                       | 30                       | 58                       | 11                | 16                    |
| Autumn, 1907..... | 8                     | 389                       | 57                       | 60                       | 7                 | 17                    |
| Autumn, 1908..... | 10                    | 356                       | 78                       | 52                       | 5                 | 26                    |
| Autumn, 1909..... | 12                    | 377                       | 69                       | 55                       | 6                 | 4                     |
| Autumn, 1910..... | 12                    | 392                       | 53                       | 50                       | 11                | 2                     |
| Autumn, 1911..... | 14                    | 430                       | 40                       | 51                       | 5                 | 4                     |
| Average.....      | 9 $\frac{2}{3}$       | 382 $\frac{2}{3}$         | 60 $\frac{2}{3}$         | 55 $\frac{2}{3}$         | 7 $\frac{2}{3}$   | 12 $\frac{2}{3}$      |

English 1 has remained within reaching distance of 400 in the last seven years, the average being 382, but that the number of sections

in English 1 has steadily increased, with the result that the average number of students in a section, which in 1905 was a shade over 50, had fallen in 1911 to about 27.<sup>1</sup> This increase in the number of sections and instructors has, of course, made possible a more effective treatment of the individual student. With this slight fluctuation in the number of registrations, it is apparent also that the number sent to English 0 has been slowly decreasing, as has already been stated, but that the number sent to English 2 has remained relatively constant; furthermore, that the number of failures in English 1 has been decreasing, particularly in the last three years, when the smaller sections have prevailed.

Enough has been said about English 2 to make some further description of this course, the final stage of the procedure, necessary. It would be obviously absurd in a course in English composition based upon theme-writing to enable a student to make up his deficiency through the passing of a single examination. English 2, known to the students as the "trailer," has, therefore, existed for many years, and has been conducted during the Winter and Spring quarters for the purpose of giving additional practice in writing to students who do not deserve credit for English 1, but who should be conditioned in the course.

The course in the Winter Quarter, when it always is largest, furnishes the most convenient object for study. It is recruited roughly from three sources: first, the overwhelming majority sent from English 1, a rather constant number fluctuating in seven years only between 50 and 64; second, the number sent up from English 0, usually in the neighborhood of 20 per year; and third, a few pick-ups from previous quarters who through illness or absence have not yet completed the English ordeal.

The fates of these students are very different. Most of them pass within two months, after the writing of six to eight themes. A few still fail to satisfy University standards at the end of the three months' period and are held in for another period of drill.

<sup>1</sup> In order to determine the average number of students per section the number sent to English 0 must be subtracted from the total before dividing by the number of sections.

These are only a handful, but they should be noted in any study of the efficiency or thoroughness of the method. Finally, in checking up totals, a small number, only once more than 10 in the last six years, are either dropped from the course or more frequently do not report.

TABLE III  
REPORT OF ENGLISH 2

|                   | Number<br>Sent from<br>English 1 | Number<br>Sent from<br>English 0 | Reported<br>from Previ-<br>ous Quarters | Passed in<br>Three or<br>Six Months | Failed in<br>Three or<br>Six Months | Dropped<br>or Did Not<br>Report |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Winter, 1906..... | 64                               | 24                               | 1                                       | 55                                  | 17                                  | 13                              |
| Winter, 1907..... | 58                               | 3                                | 4                                       | 57                                  | 1                                   | 7                               |
| Winter, 1908..... | 60                               | 11                               | 0                                       | 56                                  | 0                                   | 15                              |
| Winter, 1909..... | 52                               | 21                               | 0                                       | 63                                  | 5                                   | 5                               |
| Winter, 1910..... | 55                               | 18                               | 5                                       | 64                                  | 8                                   | 6                               |
| Winter, 1911..... | 50                               | 18                               | 0                                       | 51                                  | 7                                   | 10                              |
| Winter, 1912..... | 51                               | 20                               | 0                                       | 63                                  | 4                                   | 4                               |

In general, if we consider that the judgment of the University instructors has been in any degree sound and in any degree constant, certain deductions seem reasonable. The first is that, in spite of the best efforts of preparatory-school instructors, certain students are able to slip through who really have no place in college divisions of English, whatever their other entrance qualifications may be. Further, from the decreasing number of students set back from English 1, it seems that the average of English efficiency at college entrance is steadily increasing. Finally, as an examination of Table IV, the general summary, will show, the course as now conducted with all its complexities has much to be said in its defense.

TABLE IV  
GENERAL SUMMARY

|                   | Total No.<br>Students | No. Passed<br>via<br>English 1 | No. Passed<br>via<br>0 and 2<br>or 1 and 2 | No. Passed<br>via 0 and 1<br>(estimated) | Total<br>Passed | Total<br>Failed or<br>Dropped |
|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Autumn, 1905..... | 392                   | 214                            | 55   | 56                                       | 325             | 67                            |
| Autumn, 1906..... | 341                   | 226                            | 57   | 8  | 291             | 50                            |
| Autumn, 1907..... | 389                   | 248                            | 56   | 28                                       | 332             | 57                            |
| Autumn, 1908..... | 356                   | 195                            | 63   | 21                                       | 279             | 77                            |
| Autumn, 1909..... | 377                   | 243                            | 64   | 20                                       | 327             | 50                            |
| Autumn, 1910..... | 392                   | 276                            | 51   | 22                                       | 349             | 43                            |
| Autumn, 1911..... | 430                   | 324                            | 63   | 16                                       | 403             | 27                            |



I understand all too well that no report covering the cases of almost 2,700 students and no set of tabulations can possibly give more than an approximation of what is being accomplished. I might divide and subdivide and still discover in the final analysis that I had failed to make allowance for the case of the woman student whose credit in English 2 was to be withheld until she had brought in a certificate of vaccination.

In the main, however, the concluding table shows what, to the University instructors, cannot be anything but gratifying data. This table, which, with the exception of one column, is a mere restatement of data already provided, shows the total number of students registered in English and the numbers who have received credit for English 1 either by directly taking this course or by taking English 0 plus English 2 or by taking English 0 plus English 1. It has shown, as the other tables have, that since this system has been in effect there were two or three years of comparative fluctuation, but in the last four years of full operation the total number of registrations has increased, the total passing the regular course has increased, the total number saved by means of the special methods herein described has slightly decreased (owing to the decreased burdens laid on these courses), and that the total number of students lost through failure to pass English 1 in its various forms, or through dropping out of college has steadily been reduced. Although the entrance efficiency of the student is doubtless somewhat higher than it has been in the past, it is no less clear that the teaching efficiency in the handling of this course has risen greatly since the adoption of the present system.